

Sappho, Homer, and the wedding of Hector and Andromache

Felix Budelmann

Homer looms over the whole of Greek, and indeed Latin, literature. Authors like Euripides, Plato, or Virgil never stopped seeking novel ways of engaging with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But some of the most interesting examples in this history of responses to epic are the earliest, the responses of poets in seventh- and sixth-century Greece. And few are more intriguing than a poem by Sappho. Felix Budelmann explains.

Early experiences of Homeric epic

Sappho, from Lesbos in the Eastern Aegean, was active at the end of the seventh and the beginning of the sixth century B.C. Whereas we know that Euripides and Plato experienced the Homeric poems performed at the Great Panathenaea festival in Athens, and that both they and (much later) Virgil could also read the poems as books written on scrolls of papyrus, we do not know in what form or context Sappho encountered epic poetry. Some scholars think that, give or take, the *Iliad* was already fixed in the shape in which it has come down to us. Others think that there was no fixed text at this point, and that different performances of Homeric epic will have been markedly different.

What is more, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* did not yet have the unique position they occupy today. Various other poetic traditions existed, epic and otherwise, some of them local, others probably known more widely. Lesbos, in particular, seems to have been a poetic melting pot. Ancient scholars placed several poets on the island in the generations before Sappho's. These include one Lesches, who was credited in antiquity with a now lost epic called the *Little Iliad*, which told of the award of Achilles' arms to Odysseus and the plan of the wooden horse. They also include Terpander, the half-legendary originator of *kitharodia*, an influential type of narrative song, often on epic themes, performed to the accompaniment of the lyre (*kithara*).

Lesbos is extremely close to the Ionian mainland and some of the Ionian islands. Today this has had the consequence that it

has been in the front line in receiving refugees from Syria. In the seventh century B.C. it put Lesbos into close touch with Ionia, where Homeric epic as we know it originated. We should imagine Sappho's world as one of rich local and trans-local poetic traditions, of which Homeric epic, whatever its precise state at this point, was one.

Sappho rewrites Homer

What, then, does engagement with epic look like in such a world? In the box on p. 10 is what we know as Sappho's fragment 44, preserved, like so much of Sappho's poetry, on damaged papyri. Dots indicate gaps, and words in square brackets are modern supplements – educated guesses that try to fill at least some of the gaps.

It is clear from the papyrus that only two or three lines are missing at the beginning,

and that line 34 is indeed the end. Despite the gaps, therefore, the shape of the poem is not in doubt. Sappho narrates, in compressed form, the arrival of Hector with his bride Andromache at Troy. The narrative divides into three parts. First (lines 1–10), we have a speech by the herald Idaeus, announcing the arrival of Hector's ships bringing Andromache by sea from Thebe (Thebe in the Troad rather than Boeotian Thebes), and detailing the bride-gifts her family is sending. Then (lines 11–20) the focus shifts to a different group of people, the Trojans who set out (20 'led out') from Troy to the harbour to meet Hector and Andromache. Finally (21–34), both groups unite and process joyfully back into the city, accompanied by music-making, sacrificing, and ritual cries.

This is, on a range of dimensions, a remarkably epic-looking poem from the lyric poet Sappho. Above all, it is a narrative poem. Sappho is best known for her intense and more circumscribed first-person songs of love, but in fragment 44 there is no first person, and this is by quite a margin her longest surviving text. Of

A fragment of Sappho on a papyrus from Oxyrhynchus, P Oxy XVII 2076.

Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society and the University of Oxford Imaging Papyri Project.



Cyprus . . .
 the herald came [*?running*] . . .
 Idaeus, the swift messenger. . .
 ' . . . and of the rest of Asia . . . undying fame.
 5 Hector and his companions are bringing
 the flashing-eyed, delicate Andromache from holy Thebe
 and ever-flowing Plakia in their ships over the salty
 sea; and (there are) many golden bracelets and
 10 [*?perfumed*] purple robes, ornate playthings
 and countless silver drinking-cups and ivory.'
 So he spoke; and nimbly his dear father leapt up,
 and the rumour went to his friends throughout the
 spacious city. At once the children of Ilus yoked
 the mules to the smooth-running carriages,
 15 and the whole crowd of women and [*?tender*]-ankled maidens climbed on
 board.
 Apart . . . the daughters of Priam . . .
 and unmarried men yoked horses to chariots,
 and greatly . . .
 charioteers . . .
 20 [*?led out*] . . .
 some lines missing.
 21 . . . like gods
 . . . holy . . . all together . . .
 set out . . . to Ilium,
 and the sweet-sounding pipe [and *?kithara*] were mingled
 25 and the sound of castanets, and maidens
 sang clearly a holy song, and the wondrous reverberating
 sound reached the sky . . . [*?laughter*]
 and everywhere in the street[s] . . .
 bowls and cups . . .
 30 myrrh and cassia and frankincense were mingled.
 The elder women cried out joyfully,
 and all men cried out the lovely high-pitched paeon,
 calling upon the far-shooter with the fair lyre,
 and they sang in praise of the god-like Hector and Andromache.
 (Translation D. A. Campbell (adapted)).

course it falls well short of epic dimensions, but it is certainly long by the standards of Sapphic lyric. Some of the narrative techniques, too, recall epic, notably the use of direct speech and the catalogue of gifts. The story itself, moreover, including the characters, is one familiar from epic. Idaeus is the Trojan messenger in the *Iliad*, and the marriage of Hector and Andromache is an object of reminiscences in the *Iliad*, and was, we are told by later writers, narrated properly in epics that are now lost. Less obvious in translation are two further features that would make listeners think of epic. One is the metre: Sappho here employs a metre that is heavily dactylic and thus, in combination with the other epic features, likely to recall the dactylic hexameter of epic. The other is phrasing. The poem uses dialect forms and noun-epithet formulae (such as 'undying fame' or 'salty sea') that repeat or adapt epic formulae, so much so that scholars at one point doubted Sappho's authorship. In short, Sappho seems to be going out of her way to compose a lyric poem that makes us think of epic. Why, and to what effect?

Ways of reading Sappho

I want to outline three rather different

lens. The poem is what it appears to be, a joyous account of the wedding of Hector and Andromache, without any dark subtext.

The third interpretation combines elements of the other two. It assumes that Sappho is looking to (a version of) the *Iliad* after all, but resists the idea of subversion. Rather, the argument is that Sappho alludes to Homer only to advertise how different her story is. Her poetry – so Sappho claims by implication – is capable of shaping the story in its own way. Homer's authority is not absolute. Sappho isolates, self-consciously, the joyous moment of the wedding, and celebrates this moment for what it is. The dark future is a long way off and, in true lyric mode, Sappho concentrates on the 'now'. Epic darkness is alluded to only to be kept at bay.

Exercising literary judgement

In all literature, allusion is often a matter of judgement – different readers see different things below the surface of a text. The uncertainty of Sappho's poetic context adds a further layer of uncertainty, but we should see this uncertainty as enabling and indeed exciting. Thinking about Sappho's relationship with epic makes us contemplate the very nature of poetic traditions in this period, and makes us explore a range of different readings, each with its own merits. My own preference is for the third interpretation – a self-confident Sappho celebrating the power of her own poetry – but the other two options are equally justifiable, and we as critics have to make our individual choices. However we ultimately decide to read Sappho's fragment, we find ourselves confronted with a poem that takes the long tradition of responses to epic back all the way to the late-seventh century.

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ways of interpreting the poem and its relationship with epic. First, there is what we might call an ironical reading. Sappho's poem is all joy and light, but we know from the *Iliad* that Hector's and Andromache's marriage is doomed. This contrast is itself Iliadic: when Andromache faints as she receives the news of Hector's death, Homer recalls her wedding day and the countless gifts Hector had brought her (*Iliad* 22. 470–72). Sappho, on this reading, is using her audience's knowledge of the epic story (whether or not in the precise shape of our *Iliad*) to undercut the celebratory moment she is narrating. Hers is a tragic or wistful poem, the happiness it narrates all the more precious for being known to be short-lived.

Our second interpretation starts from the assumption that Sappho and her audience either did not know the *Iliad* the way we do, or knew it but did not give it the same privileged status; it emphasizes that Sappho inherited many other poetic traditions in the 'melting pot' of Lesbos, as we saw earlier. The more we imagine her as drawing on a wealth of different traditions, some of them still malleable, the less we feel compelled to diagnose irony by viewing the story through an Iliadic